Crisis Communication of National Destination Management Organizations before and during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

When a tourist destination goes into crisis, the news about the crisis immediately reaches visitors. However, in 2020 the coronavirus pandemic affected not only one destination, but also resulted in a global crisis throughout the entire tourism sector since governmental restrictions were introduced for the sake of worldwide security. As potential travellers were only able to plan their trips, mostly using online platforms, crisis communication, awareness raising, or even reminder campaigns on the part of tourist destinations began to gain in value. In 2021 the national regulations fundamentally affecting tourism determined what opportunities remained open or were instead closed to national destination management organizations (DMOs). As these decisions became endowments and factors that could not be influenced, we chose to focus our research on how the online communication of tourist destinations has changed due to the pandemic. In the study, we review both the pre-crisis communication of national DMOs of the European Union and their online activity during the coronavirus pandemic. Our goal is to explore the change between the two periods: the revealed differences in communication between the first and second waves of the pandemic. We will also examine the possibilities for recovery and formulate recommendations for a post-pandemic communication strategy.

Keywords

destination management, crisis communication, DMO, coronavirus

1 Introduction

Communication is an important aspect of effective and efficient crisis management. The issue of crises and crisis management appeared as early as 1999, in the work of Lee and Harrald (1999), who noted that ensuring crisis management, post-crisis recovery and organizational continuity must be important competences for leaders in both the public and private sectors. However, the real challenge is to identify crises in a timely manner and implement recovery strategies to mitigate and repair damage (Darling et al., 1996). A crisis management strategy, which should include a crisis communication plan, could be a tool for this. Applying a pre-prepared crisis communication strategy can restrict the negative effects of the public media both during the crisis and during the recovery/settlement phase. The role of crisis communication and marketing is to provide information to key stakeholders; to help prevent the negative effects of the crisis from escalating; and to support the destination in recovering from the crisis by preserving the destination's image and reputation. Managing and developing crisis communication and marketing strategies at the organizational level are therefore also critical competences for tourism managers (Ritchie et al., 2004).

According to Henderson (1999), national tourism organizations are responsible for marketing countries (considering those countries as destinations), for visitor-related research, and for product development, who should therefore also play an important role in the tourism crisis management process. The aim of our research was to explore the changes in communication prior to and during the coronavirus pandemic and point out any differences in the first and second (possibly third) waves of the pandemic.

Previously published studies cover the Covid-19 related crisis management of some EU member states. Uniquely, however, the present analysis examines the actions taken by all Member States and focuses on their communication.

The study reviews the number of visitors in the EU Member States and the government restrictions taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, which had a profound effect on the tourism sector. The study focuses on the pre-crisis online communication of national destination management organizations, covering the official tourism websites operated by DMOs and the most popular social media interfaces (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok). In addition, the study analyses the appearances of the DMOs on the online platforms during the coronavirus pandemic.

2 Literature review
2.1 Crises in tourism
The literature review focuses primarily on the emergence of the crisis and crisis communication in tourism, also covering the current trends in destination-level communication.

A crisis in tourism can be seen as any unexpected event that reduces tourists' confidence in the destination concerned and disrupts the destination's ability to carry out their activities as usual (Patrichi, 2013). Mazilu et al. (2019) suggest that economic recession may be one of the factors causing or contributing to the tourism crisis; furthermore, currency instability, withdrawal of investment funds, political events (such as elections, war, deterioration of international relations or terrorism), civil unrest, increased crime and violence, and natural disasters are also factors causing crisis. Although Mazilu and her co-authors state that terrorism can cause the most damage to tourism, the 2020-2021 period has shown that health-related crises such as the coronavirus pandemic can pose even greater challenges as they occur globally and affect tourism worldwide and not just some destinations.

2.2 Crises communication principles
"Crisis communication is the process in which news, messages, information are used to overcome a malfunction" (Barlai and Kővágó, 1996:p.16). In doing so, up-to-date and realistic information is provided in connection with the crisis and its remedy (Fenyvesi, 2005). Proper crisis communication is an essential part of crisis management, and a well-designed communication crisis plan can reduce the damage caused. Prompt response and information are good tools for alleviating a crisis (Ritchie, 2004). According to Ritchie (2004), communication is an important aspect of effective and efficient crisis management, therefore accurate information about the crisis should be provided to those affected as soon as possible during the crisis (Mazilu et al., 2019). Open communication is key (Yeh, 2021), but it is also essential to bring together the tourism providers of the destination (Birkner et al., 2018). Crisis management and crisis communication will play a key role in tourist destinations, if any dimension of security is in doubt (Kiss and Michalkó, 2020).

Crisis communication has a prominent role in three main relationship systems: between emergency professionals and tourism entrepreneurs; between tourism actors; and between the destination and tourists. It is difficult for a tourist destination to follow high volume of news, on which its response to the crisis depends. The most important communication task after the crisis is to clarify misinformation and restore previous trust in the destination. Physical recovery is always easier than repairing image damage (Mair et al., 2016). When a tourist destination is in crisis, the news of the crisis reaches visitors immediately (Sönmez et al., 1999), and many tourists identify the problem with the entire country even if the crisis threatens only a particular region (Tarlow, 2019).

Mazilu et al. (2019) examined three factors in crisis communication in the pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis periods: communication strategy, promotion, and security systems.

The pre-crisis phase is basically a preparation in a calm environment, as it cannot be known what kind of crisis may befall us. In the during-crisis phase the crisis must be responded to immediately as the image of the destination can still be shaped in the first 24 hours; however, in the case of an inappropriate reaction, this can deteriorate a lot. At this stage, the communication strategy and the relationship with the media are of paramount importance. In the post-crisis period, the main goal of the destination is to regain the sense of security and confidence of tourists. According to Gurtner (2007), many destinations are not ready to deal with a tourism crisis. The example of Bali shows that, after the crisis, it is a difficult task to improve the country's image internationally in the short term, therefore special attention must be paid to domestic tourism and travellers from nearby countries. The evolution of the image of a destination during and after a crisis is a key issue. According to Pennington-Gray and Pizam (2011), a crisis at a destination surely has a negative impact on its image. Tourism destination management organizations should therefore pay special attention to protecting the image of the destination area. The crisis may therefore have a fundamental impact on travellers' perceptions of their destination and their choice of destination (Cartier and Taylor, 2020).

As has been stated by Volo (2008), crisis communication is determined by several factors: what needs to be communicated (good or bad news), in what tone (optimistic, pessimistic), and the context within which we communicate. The message itself is determined by the nature, magnitude, and consequences of the risk, which are the measures of effective avoidance and response. If tourists have this information, it is usually easier for them to decide whether the risk of travelling to the destination exceeds their own risk tolerance.

Tourism destination management organizations play a leading role during and after a crisis, helping the local tourism industry to respond to and recover from the situation (Cartier and Taylor, 2020). Villacé-Molinero et al. (2021) explain that pre-travel communication and risk assessment are particularly important to maintaining trust. Research shows that different media reports play a crucial role in risk perception and travel decision (Neuburger and Egger, 2021). In the case of a pandemic, travel decision-making is best influenced by local governments and destination management organizations. These organizations bear the highest level of trust in security-related communication. Hence, DMOs should provide information on risk mitigation measures applied in the destination area to restore people's confidence in travel (Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021).

Social media has proven its worth in many areas, not only playing a prominent role in the world's most popular tourism campaigns today, but also as an effective tool in times of crisis. In the digital world, people demand hyper-transparency, and dialogue is as important as the message itself. However, according to Destinations International (2014), surprisingly few target areas have included social media in their strategic communication framework. DMOs need to incorporate social media into their crisis management plans. Silence, or avoiding interaction is no longer likely to be a successful strategy, and it is impossible to gain the trust of potential visitors without this two-way communication.

3 Research questions and methodology

Even before the current coronavirus pandemic, tourism had experienced many crises, of which some concerned health. Volo (2008) analysed the effects of bird flu on tourism by examining the websites of tourism organizations:

- Is there a link on the homepage to a summary of tourist safety and emergency information?
- Is there a page or a subpage on the website dedicated to bird flu (such as "travel tips")?
- Does the website provide emergency numbers, such as medical numbers?

Almost all tourists know and use the internet to gather information, but most do not use it as a risk management tool. This is especially true when significant effort is required to obtain the information or the probability of finding the required information is low (Volo, 2008). As a result of the above, communication on the emergence and reduction of risks should be based not only on websites but also on social media interfaces.

In our empirical research, we examined the crisis communication of the European Union Member States (Fig. 1) on online platforms before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and during the pandemic crisis. Our aim was to point out the possible differences in the first, second and possibly third waves of the pandemic as well as to examine the potential for recovery and make proposals for post-pandemic communication strategies.
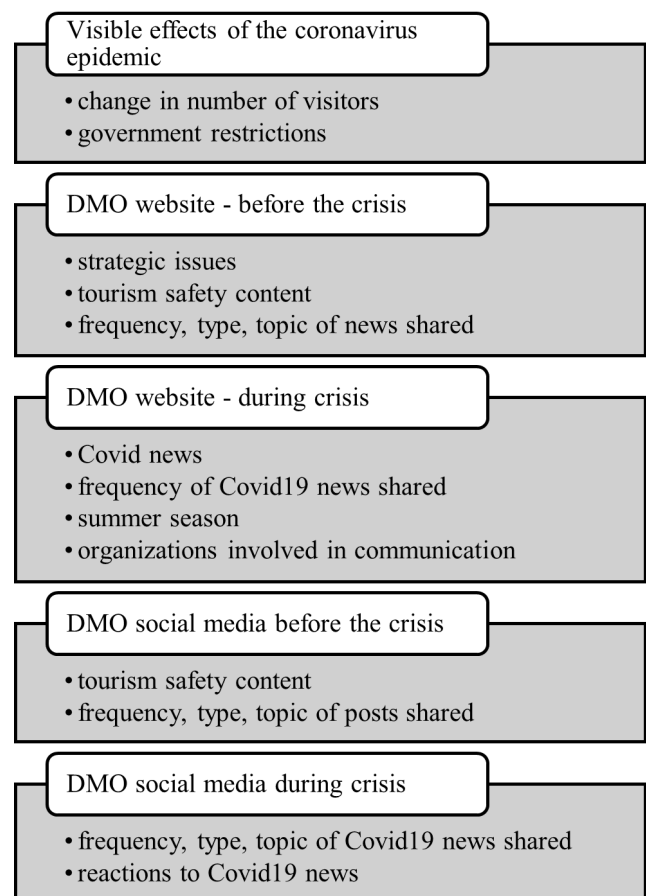

Visible effects of the coronavirus epidemic
- change in number of visitors
- government restrictions

DMO website - before the crisis
- strategic issues
- tourism safety content
- frequency, type, topic of news shared

DMO website - during crisis
- Covid news
- frequency of Covid19 news shared
- summer season
- organizations involved in communication

DMO social media before the crisis
- tourism safety content
- frequency, type, topic of posts shared

DMO social media during crisis
- frequency, type, topic of Covid19 news shared
- reactions to Covid19 news

Fig. 1 The main issues examined in the study

Our study aims to verify the following research assumptions:

1. As the topic of tourism security has become more and more important in recent years, this theme would appear on the destination websites of all EU Member States even before the coronavirus pandemic, with a special focus on the public safety of tourists.

2. Destination websites have focused primarily on sharing textual and graphical content before and during the pandemic. The use of embedded videos, games, polls, or questions on the websites has not been typical.

3. The issue of tourism security also appeared in the social media platforms, and during the coronavirus pandemic the content, shared on these interfaces, played an important role in crisis communication.

4. Destinations rely heavily on word-of-mouth messages in their online communications, therefore they actively involved famous spokespersons, ambassadors, and influencers before the pandemic; and a dedicated contact person was provided for communication during the coronavirus pandemic.

The research examined the English-language websites of the official national DMOs in the Member States plus, where available, their posts on the following social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter. The research was carried out in March 2021 with the involvement of tourism and hospitality students of the Corvinus University of Budapest.

4 Results
4.1 The evolution of visitor numbers in the mirror of the coronavirus pandemic

The visitor numbers of the Member States between 2010-2019 showed a stable increase without exception, and tourism was on a growth trajectory across Europe. However, the appearance of coronavirus had a serious negative impact on almost all European countries. Latvia is an exception, where the 2020 numbers have exceeded the 2019 values. The biggest loss was experienced in Cyprus, where tourist numbers in 2020 fell to 22% of the figure for 2019. This is followed by Greece (27%) and Spain (31%). For these destinations, the period from March to October can be considered a high season, therefore it is not surprising that the pandemic, which exploded in the beginning of 2020, affected this area most severely, since they did not even receive guests in the pre-season, and domestic travel was banned. In addition to the listed countries, the number

of tourists in France, Slovakia, Portugal, the Netherlands, Croatia, Romania, and Hungary decreased by more than 50% compared to 2019 (Table 1).

Besides Latvia, the decrease in visitors to Italy (89% of the 2019 figure), Denmark (79%) and Austria (74%) was the most moderate. This may be due to the fact that these European countries had advanced the mitigation of the epidemiological situation experienced during the summer and thus service providers could receive guests. These few months generated significant revenues, though the data remained below the projected 2020 values.

We analysed the number of domestic and foreign visitors together in our study. At the same time, we investigated the above distribution. Although, of course, domestic tourism decreased significantly in 2020, it is clearly stated that the decisive cause of the decline was the reduction of the number of foreign visitors for all countries. The visitors in 2020 were mostly domestic travellers, who were able to travel domestically despite the coronavirus pandemic, and in the summer season they were able to seize the opportunities afforded by the lifting of restrictions.

4.2 Measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic

Without exception, each Member State introduced restrictions that significantly affected tourism. Since the emergence of the crisis, we can talk about a succession of waves, in response to which the measures introduced during the first wave (March 2020) were drastic. In most countries, after the summer seasonal alleviation, the second wave started from the autumn of 2020, which turned into the third wave at the beginning of 2021. Government restrictions that were imposed to prevent the spread of the

Table 1 Change in the number of visitors in 2020 compared to 2019 data

Country	change compared to 2019	Country	change compared to 2019
Cyprus	22%	Czech Republic	55%
Greece	27%	Poland	55%
Spain	31%	Lithuania	57%
France	36%	Slovenia	58%
Slovakia	37%	Finland	62%
Portugal	39%	Germany	62%
Netherlands	41%	Sweden	64%
Croatia	45%	Austria	74%
Romania	48%	Denmark	79%
Hungary	48%	Italy	89%
Estonia	53%	Latvia	101%

Source: Eurostat (2021)

coronavirus pandemic therefore also occurred in two or three waves. In our study, tourism is examined primarily in respect of restrictive measures concerning demand.

On 18 May 2020, the UNWTO (2020) examining 217 destinations identified four major categories of travel restrictions:

1. full or partial limit (85% of destinations);
2. suspension of flights (5%);
3. destination-specific travel restrictions (5%)
4. and various additional measures (5%), such as a quarantine or 14-day isolation, visa measures or medical certificate upon arrival.

In our research, we summarised the most commonly occurring tourism measures taken by countries at the time of the three waves of the pandemic. Restrictions most affecting tourism were the following:

- Entry restrictions: in all three waves of the pandemic, countries used entry restrictions (e.g. compulsory PCR-test to entry, quarantine obligation imposed on an infestation classification by country). This measure was the most popular: in the first wave 20, in the second 18 and in the third 21 countries applied this option.
- Outgoing travel restrictions: travel abroad was forbidden or not recommended in 10–11 countries, which explains the decrease of the visitor number in the European countries.
- Curfew or restriction were applied in 14 countries during the first wave, and then in 13 in the second wave. 16 countries applied them in the third wave. Restrictions primarily allowed people to go to work and shopping, however one-day excursions were banned in these countries.
- Compulsory mask wearing: In the spring of 2020 16 countries ordered people to wear a mask in enclosed spaces, but during the second and third wave 21 and 19 countries made it compulsory.
- Limiting the number of people in a place: gatherings and mass events at the time of the first wave were banned in 15 countries or a concrete maximum number of participants was set. In the second wave, 22 countries used this option and 18 in the third wave.
- Closure of restaurants: all forms of tourism were deeply affected by the closure of restaurants or restrictions to their operation (limited activity or opening hours). In 13 countries, restaurants totally closed during the first wave, in the second and third waves only 3 countries used this option.

- Restricted opening hours of restaurants: it was common to restrict the opening hours of food outlets in the first wave, and in the second and third waves 19 and 21 countries applied this method.
- Prohibition of events: tourism was adversely affected by the prohibition on organizing events. In the first wave 18 countries did this, then 14 countries prohibited all sports, leisure, and family events in the second and third waves.
- Closure of accommodation: the pandemic caused serious problems to accommodation in the EU Member States. Half of the Member States decided to fully close accommodation or made it available only for business travellers.
- Closure of entertainment venues: like the catering and accommodation sector, entertainment venues and cultural institutions were also closed. In the first wave this happened only in 10 countries, then in the second and third waves 17 and 19 countries decided to prevent the spread of the pandemic by insisting on social distancing in such places.

4.3 Online communication of national DMOs before the pandemic

In our previous research (Keller and Tóth-Kaszás, 2021), we investigated the tourism development strategies of the EU Member States and accounted for the various tourism security measures in the current tourism development strategies. We stated that many countries had a valid strategy for 2019 or 2020. In this study, we have checked for the existence of current strategies available in English, and have found that only 9 countries have put together such a strategic document since then. A special marketing communication strategy was found in 7 EU countries.

Seven national DMO websites (Bulgaria, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Germany) do not contain any tourism security entries that deal with public security, health safety, consumption safety, technical security, or navigational security issues. In countries that have published tourism security content on their website, primarily the navigation-related issues have been promoted, most often in France, Cyprus, and Latvia.

The involvement of famous spokespersons, ambassadors, and influencers in a country's national marketing communication was found in only 3 countries (Estonia, Portugal, Slovenia). There are 14 countries with a media contact person, who also provides adequate and authentic information during crises, while 9 DMOs marked contacts with travel agencies.

Since a significant part of DMO's websites is constructed in a blog-based or static way, the permanent content, frequency, type, and theme of their content prior to the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic cannot be clearly determined. Another problem was caused by the fact that a few websites did not include the date of preparation of the content. Most news shared on websites are displayed in a text and/or pictorial form. From a communication perspective, the combination of these two content types is the simplest and most appropriate, as the message can be indicated by the text, the brand name (in our case the name of the destination) can be shown and written, while the image contributes to the creation of the required mood and reinforces the message with implicit communication. Videos appear rarely on the websites (we can find videos on the Bulgarian, Greek, Dutch, Croatian, Italian, and Slovenian sites). Games, votes, or question type entries on websites are not typical (except for Bulgaria and Slovenia, where 1-1 such entry is available). This is probably because the national DMOs on the one hand do not consider websites as an appropriate two-way communication channel, therefore they cannot/are not planning to develop consumer interaction through the website as social media interfaces provide a simpler and more popular terrain for this kind of communication. On the other hand, since our study covered web pages in English, we can assume that updating content and tracking the visitors to the website is seen as of lower priority. As for the content of the shared news, attractions are the most common, closely followed by the promotion of events.

To create bidirectional communication, social media offers the best interface today. The presence and activity of the different European Union Member States are quite heterogeneous on social media.

It can be concluded that most national DMOs are present on four different platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (Table 2). TikTok is getting more popular nowadays, however, it is less applied and even less employed by DMOs, so much so that no one used it daily.

Content relating to tourism security and safety of travel was limited in the social media platforms of DMOs prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Typically, the number of entries per country was from 0 to 10, which dealt with public security, health safety, consumption security, technical safety, or navigation security issues. In addition to these posts, it can be concluded that they were not explicitly intended for tourists, but for residents. However, these themed entries can also provide useful information for foreigners.

Content dealing with tourism security (at least 3 entries in the period under review) appeared mostly on the following platforms:

- Facebook in Austria, Belgium, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Spain and Slovenia.
- Instagram in Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Latvia.
- YouTube in Cyprus, Finland, France, Latvia and Italy.
- Twitter in Finland, France, Italy and Spain.

Table 2 Daily used social media platforms and typical post types, topics

Plat-form	Daily use of the platform	Typical post types	Topic types
Facebook	18 DMOs: Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Netherlands, Croatia, Ireland, Hungary, Malta, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Slovakia, Slovenia	photos: 26 DMOs videos: 14 DMOs texts: 3 DMOs polls: 3 DMOs plays: 1 DMO	Attraction: 65% Programme: 30% Guest opinion: 5%
Instagram	11 DMOs: Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Croatia, Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Slovenia	photos: 26 DMOs videos: 7 DMOs polls: 3 DMOs texts: 1 DMO plays: 1 DMO	Attraction: 69% Programme: 11% Developments: 5% Guest opinion: 15%
You Tube	1 DMO: Italy	videos: 19 DMOs	Attraction: 65% Programme: 15% Developments: 10% Guest opinion: 10%
Tik Tok	-	videos: 2 DMOs	Attraction: 66% Guest opinion: 34%
Twitter	18 DMOs: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain	photos: 23 DMOs videos: 11 DMOs texts: 11 DMOs polls: 1 DMO	Attraction: 45% Programme: 34% Developments: 13% Guest opinion: 8%

Source: own research, 2022

As for the topics of the shared content on social media, Denmark, Germany and Latvia typically share the entries, thoughts and feelings of their former guests. Czech Republic, Estonia, and Romania present various attractions of the country and the "top list" places through images and short descriptions. Ireland and Slovakia regularly published a question type entry ("Who would you bring with you here?", "What is your favourite place?"). The Netherlands points out that the best way to discover the country is by bicycle and that this activity also has its own etiquette. Italy shares contents on the use of ski lifts and public transport.

Regarding the topics of posts published on social media surfaces of DMOs, we can conclude that most of the shares are about the attractions of the destination, followed by events.

In most cases, positive guest opinions appear in social media, but they less often report about any development. In the context of the topic of various platforms and posts, Twitter appears to be where the theme of posts is more diverse, along with attractions and videos of events, which are also common.

4.4 Online communication of national DMOs during the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic, which reached Europe in early 2020 somewhat restructured the news on the DMO's websites. The main task of national DMOs is to develop and protect the image of a given country: this mode of communication therefore played a crucial role during the pandemic in that the destination aimed above all to retain its safe image. Honest communication is fundamental to all crisis situations, but "admitting" that the region is currently unsafe and not suitable for receiving visitors, can awaken serious doubts in potential travellers about when it will be safe again or whether it will ever be safe at all. Despite these doubts, the Dutch, Luxembourgish, Italian and Slovakian national DMOs published content on their websites, where they explained that it was not safe to travel to the destination. This type of communication was primarily available prior to the 2020 summer period, when the virus itself was unknown and there were no prospects of treatment of the disease or effective prevention. 15 countries also created a separate menu item on the official tourist website for summarising and sharing news related to coronavirus.

During the period from March 2020 to February 2021, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, and Germany did not share any news about coronavirus at all on the official tourist websites (or we were unable to identify when the news was created, because of the absence of post-date). The frequency of sharing virus-news on the official tourism website varied, a statistic which clearly outlines the various waves of the pandemic. Most entries were made on the websites of the DMOs in March-April 2020, and the volume remained almost unchanged until the start of the summer period. In the high season we heard less about the virus, and the news was mostly about opening and upcoming opportunities. In October 2020, however, the second wave of the pandemic gathered momentum, so the sharing of related news was also more common until November. However, since the virus was no longer novel and restrictions were introduced by the Member States and previous restrictions were re-applied, virus-related news was not published as frequently as in the spring. Following the re-emergence at the end of 2020 and at the beginning of 2021, the third wave was appeared in February 2021, thus there was a rising trend in the appearance of coronavirus, restrictions, travel conditions and vaccine content.

The most intense communication was developed by Austria and Belgium, each of whom published 60 coronavirus related news items on their websites during the 12-month period analysed. Croatia shared such news 31 times, while Slovenia did so 19 times.

At the time of the coronavirus pandemic, the involvement of celebrities did not jump compared to the pre-crisis period. In fact, Hungary was the only country to involve a famous man, Pál Győrffy (spokesperson of the National Ambulance Service) in the generation of pandemic content.

The appearance of the coronavirus pandemic also had a significant impact on the social media communication of the national DMOs. The number of posts specifically related to COVID-19 was remarkable, the 28 Member States published a total of 483 entries across the five examined social media platforms in March 2020, and a further 473 entries were published in April. Thereafter, the novelty of the pandemic was reduced, and many restrictions were released; consequently, the total number of posts reduced to between 70–95 during the summer months. With the appearance of the second wave of the pandemic, the number of posts rose again (a total of 115–165 posts were seen between October and January), but the volume of this time was much lower than in the spring of 2020. DMOs mostly used Facebook to share this news (11 DMOs), but some organizations preferred Twitter (7) and Instagram (5) as platforms.

National DMOs used social media platforms to different degrees during the reviewed period of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 – February 2021): an average of

82 coronavirus related posts were available on the national DMO's Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter surfaces. Belgium stands out from the list, whose DMO published Covid-19 content on the five largest social media platforms 799 times. Meanwhile, Slovenian (330), Austrian (221), Cyprian (134) and Spanish (92) DMOs distributed content to a higher degree than the EU average. The topics of posts can mostly be described as virus-related summaries, restrictions, deadlock news, secure travel, virtual visits, and tours, next to the #stayhome, #staysafe entries. The Slovenian DMO's witty manner urged his followers to make DIY masks and Latvia pointed out that the size of the country and spatial dispersal of the major attractions simplify personal aloofness. In the examined 12 months, Lithuania and Ireland published news about Covid-19 less than five times on social media.

National DMOs also tried to communicate with their followers despite the appearance of the coronavirus pandemic, conducting various reminder and retrieval campaigns. The photo-sharing platform Instagram became an excellent basis for this (11 DMOs preferred reminder types of campaigns), as well as Facebook used by 5 DMOs and Twitter used by 5 DMOs. Most of the retrieval entries appeared in the form of a picture in social media, but many videos were shared as well. On Facebook, a few DMOs challenged their followers in a game (for example, in Croatia with "where was the picture taken" types of posts) and two DMOs used online polls on Twitter.

In the summer of 2020 tourism was relieved, so "restart"-themed content also appeared in social media. After the active summer months, there was a decline, but at the beginning of 2021 with the appearance of vaccines a new optimism emerged, thereby increasing the number of recovery entries.

Regarding the type of posts, DMOs primarily shared photo images, but the video, mood-industrious content was shared on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Text content appeared primarily on Twitter, such as:
- Lithuania: #bucketlistlithuania campaign, in which the country's most exciting, "need to see" attractions were collected.
- Luxembourg: tried to start and boost domestic tourism with EUR 50 vouchers, which news was actively posted.
- Malta: compliance stickers were given to restaurants, hotels, beaches, clubs, and other catering units, which complied with social distancing and personal hygiene rules, thereby reducing the possibility of infection of Covid-19.

5 Discussion

By examining the communication activity of the national DMOs of the European Union, it can be concluded that official websites cannot be considered important. Before the coronavirus pandemic, static content and blog posts were found on webpages, which were mostly built around regions, attractions, events, and programmes. A few websites dealt with different aspects of tourism security including only basic security information (for example, emergency numbers, route planners and protocols in case of being robbed). With the appearance of the pandemic, there was no structural change on several DMOs' websites. In many cases, a pop-up window informed the visitor that there were restrictions or prohibitions because of the COVID-19 and then directed the visitors to another website. Other organizations created submenus within the website, where the news collection was readable. The websites were primarily used to provide information, but they were not suitable for bi-directional communication and the preservation of the image.

Among the social media platforms of the national DMOs, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are preferred. Almost every organization has a YouTube channel, but on these surfaces, they rarely post, and most of them contain a native text. For now, TikTok appears to be avoidable for DMOs. Before the coronavirus pandemic, content about tourism security was limited on the social media of the DMOs. Typically, the number of posts per country are between 0 and 10. Like the websites, social media posts also focused on attractions and programmes, but the images are dominated by the form of message transfer, which are more suitable to improve the mood and to raise the demand than text posts.

Although several programmes had to be deleted because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Danish DMO showed that these difficult situations about safety could be overcome with creativity. The GoVisitDenmark official Facebook site shows the visit of children to Santa Claus, which is different from the usual meeting, yet it gives the opportunity to create a festive mood. Although many DMOs organized virtual walks to show the sights of their countries, the Danish example is considered a good example, which not only invited people to online tours but also asked the opinion of the platform followers about the attractions. This can be considered as a demand assessment of which sites are the most interesting (according to the needs, these attractions were virtually presented during Covid-19).

On the social media platforms of the Czech DMO (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter), even at the beginning of

the coronavirus pandemic, it was highlighted that tourists should not cancel their trips to the Czech Republic, but they should only postpone them to help tourist providers. They communicated this in all social media platforms, and also recommended their virtual tours and other online content. The Czech social media was considered to be exceptionally optimistic in 2021. In their view, in 2023 we can travel without restrictions. This type of motivating posts has started to be shared in the third quarter of 2020 on the main communication channels.

Meanwhile, the specialty of Spain's communication was that there was a strong campaign on the YouTube channel, where the DMO published more than 100 videos in 3 months, mostly about their attractions or food specialties. The "Spain Will Wait" videos were available not only in Spanish but in at least 4 different languages. Short films reached tens of thousands of people on average, but there were Covid-19-themed videos that were viewed by over a million people on the YouTube channel. Later (going into the summer), teaser videos were posted to lure visitors back. In addition, from the point of view of the coronavirus pandemic, the country's Instagram platform should be highlighted, where the rules of a safe journey were displayed in a separate menu, which was continuously updated and supplemented by newer information on the social network site. It is also noteworthy that the locations and their security rules visited by tourists and locals were highlighted (for example, accommodation, beach, restaurant). The DMO also started a new series of posts, in which a colour was posted every week, and then in the following seven days they showed where this colour could be found, which architectural attractions used it and what it meant.

For their part, the Italian DMO developed a unified campaign, the primary purpose of which was to present the less-known small settlements in Italy. Supporting posts were highlighted with #italianvillages (for months). In addition, the organization created a permanent hashtag (#) system that has always changed according to the coronavirus pandemic regulations (in summer: #traveltoItaly, currently: # TreasureItaly and # IlikeItaly).

6 Conclusion

As a conclusion, we will explore the validity of our initial assumptions, based on our empirical research results:

1. Not all EU Member States communicated tourism safety related messages on their destination websites. On those countries' websites where such content was available, navigation safety-related issues were the main topic, not public safety.

2. Regardless of the pandemic, destinations published primarily textual and pictorial content on their destination websites, and, with a few exceptions, rarely seized the possibilities of using videos, games, polling, or question-type posts.

3. As in the case of websites, the publication of tourism safety-related content on social media platforms, operated by national DMOs of the EU Member States, was not typical either prior to the coronavirus. However, there were still quite heterogeneous activities on social media during the pandemic. An average of 82 coronavirus-related pieces of content appeared on the Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter pages of the national DMOs between March 2020 and February 2021. Belgium was outstanding from the list, whose DMO published Covid-19-related content on the five largest social media platforms altogether 799 times.

4. Contrary to our initial assumption, only three EU Member States involved ambassadors and influencers in their online communication, while a media contact person was appointed in 14 countries during the pandemic.

The date of the appearance of the coronavirus pandemic can be clearly identified in social media. The number of posts related to the pandemic was outstanding in the first months of the crisis. During this period DMOs tried to maintain the consumer relationship and their destination's image, publishing reminders, remembering posts, questions, and games. However, in terms of the number of posts, DMOs did not perform well. According to the literature, it is also important to contact consumers in a crisis so that competitors cannot lure away the visitors. However, the pandemic affected the totality of tourism, meaning that DMOs were not forced to develop customer relationships. It should be noted, however, that in the case of other types of crisis, this is not an adequate attitude. From May 2020, there was subdued activity, partly attributable to the hectic tourism of the summer. (It was possible to travel to some places, less so to others.) During this period, the number of posts about Covid-19 significantly decreased until October, and as regards the topic and content of posts, DMOs returned to their pre-pandemic habits. Although the second wave closed the journeys again, the virus and even the vaccine-related posts appeared in social media, and there was no dominant effect of novelty. DMO social media activity remained moderate, but we have introduced some good practices for the development of the post-pandemic communication strategy in Section 5.

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